DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 126 519 CS 202 850

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TITLE Teaching as Intervention: Saving the English Curriculum in a Time of Reckoning.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (Boston, Massachusetts, April 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Educational Theories; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Curriculum; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Intervention; *Teacher Responsibility; *Teaching Methods; Verbal Ability

ABSTRACT

Although English teachers have been blamed for the decreasing verbal ability of the nation's children, recent declines may be more accurately attributed to the general instructional climate of the day. The post-Sputnik era viewed education as a function of active intervention, where the teacher assumed a dominant role in shaping the students' experiences. More recent trends view teaching as nonintervention, where the teacher provides a neutral environment in which the students' latent abilities can flourish. English instructors must realize that both positions significantly affect student response. Teachers must accept the responsibility for developing cognitive and affective skills through curriculum planning and direct instruction. While interaction in group experiences remains a worthy teaching technique, the creation of opportunities for individual study is equally important. (KS)

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This paper was originally presented at the Secondary School English Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, Boston, Massachusetts, April, 1976.

CS 202 850

Teaching as Intervention:
Saving the English Curriculum in a Time of Reckoning

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At a time when the College Entrance Examination Board, the American College Testing Program, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress all report that the verbal ability of the nation's children seems to be decreasing, it should come as no surprise to those of us who teach English that we are the ones being singled out to feel the hot breath of reckoning.

Some of this plight, of course, is a result of the usual misconceptions that arise from our being traditionally, though wrongly, charged with the sole responsibility for producing a literate citizenry, and some of it is a result of the public's persistent lack of awareness that verbal ability is a function of not only school factors, such as curriculum content and language skills instruction, but of the non-school factors as well, such as the amount and kind of verbalizing that occurs in the family and among peers, or the proportion of visual to verbal stimuli in the environment.

But most of our plight seems to be a result of the growing suspicion among our critics, and even among ourselves, that the decrease in verbal ability has come about because of the displacement of the subject-centered curriculum of the post-Sputnik days by the student-centered curriculum of the post-Dartmouth days. Where once there was emphasis on preparing students to function like literary critics, on formal instruction about theories of grammar, and on writing essays on literary topics, there is now an attending to affective response to literary works, the manipulations of practical rhetoric, and the writing in many modes for many purposes. But while we may be taking pride in these accomplishments, there

is the increasing belief that the English curriculum today neglects the teaching and learning of essential language skills and that it ultimately has negative effects on the development of verbal ability.

There is the great possibility, therefore, that as a means of halting the decreases in verbal ability and of regaining lost ground, English teachers will be forced back or will turn back on their own to the sort of curriculum that prevailed 10 to 15 years ago. Were this to happen, however, it is unlikely that the intended result would obtain, for as the arguments below will show, the portion of the decline in verbal ability that can be abscribed to school-related factors is probably not a product of our English curricula themselves, but rather is a product of the instructional strategies used to implement these curricula.

It is not that today's English curriculum is inimical to the teaching and learning of language skills, but rather that in English, and in other curriculum areas as well, the instructional strategies we have been using are inimical to the teaching and learning of anything. If there are school related factors causing some of the decreased verbal ability, which we must be willing to admit, they probably reside here, and our problems can be seen as having less to do with us as English teachers than they do with us as teachers.

Interventionist vs. Non-Interventionist Teaching

If there is anything that has characterized American education, it has been its tendency to turn toward opposites. Whether it was Benjamin Franklin founding his academy with its practical orientation to counter the classical training of the Latin schools, or whether it was the child-centered cuuriculum to counter the subject-centered curriculum, it has generally been the case that our educational philosophies or modes of operating have been formulated as reactions to whatever philosophy or mode of operating was currently holding sway.

A moment's reflection will show, moreover, that the most significant of these polarities can be described as those, such as the post-Sputnik English curriculum, which view education as <u>putting in</u>, where the student is a vessel and the teacher fills it with worthy things, and those, such as the post-Dartmouth curriculum, which view education as <u>drawing out</u>, where the student is a seed and the teacher provides the environment for germination. It is also the case that the putting in theories have been associated with the notion of teaching as <u>intervention</u> - that is, teaching where the teacher plays a dominant role in shaping the students' educational experience - while the drawing out theories have been associated with the notion of teaching as <u>non-intervention</u> - that is, teaching where the teacher plays a much less dominant role in shaping the students' educational experience.

Unfortunately, it is an error to hold that one of these theories is interventionist and the other non-interventionist, for the fact is that whether we see education as putting in or drawing out, we nevertheless, and in both cases, construct the apparatus of education so that as our students engage with it, they will become discriminably different at the end from the way they were at the beginning. If the purpose of both these theories, therefore, is to foster such change in our students - to make them different when they leave from the way they were when they came - then both are interventionist.

The nature of our goals does not alter this fact. We may want our students to be able, after a sequence of instruction, to write with ninety percent accuracy four examples of the third person present subjunctive singular, or we may want them to become sentient human beings, respectful of all living things, and loving of one another, or we may want them to be both of these, or neither. The point is that no matter how liberal or conservative, idealistic or realistic, supportive or rejective, autocratic or democratic, machanistic or humanistic, if we expect,

or even hope, that our students will be different as a result of having been in our classrooms, then we must accept the fact that we are interventionists.

Cognitive vs. Affective Environments

It is this fact of our essential interventionist nature that has been forgotten as we have moved from the post-Sputnik curriculum to the post-Dartmouth curriculum. In our attempts to humanize the curriculum, for instance, there has been considerably less attention given to the cognitive activities in the classroom than to the affective ones. Our attention has been greatly focused on creating classroom environments where students are comfortable and not threatened and where they feel free to speak out or write out with the fair assurance that they will find their language productions positively received.

This has been a most important accomplishment, but unfortunately it has brought with it myriad difficulties. In previous times, when our students' speaking or writing was faulty in its logic, thin in its evidentiation, superficial in its analysis, or low level in its synthesis, these matters were brought unequivocally to their attention, and not having the refuge that our more accepting era provides for those who can but do not function by the cognitive modes that characterize Western thought, they knew that they had to alter their performances and deal with the phenomena before them in acceptable ways.

Today, under the influence of non-intervention, we have come to accept, almost gratefully, any student production. Presented with these sentences, "As I viewed each group of students, I noticed most seemed to be evenly matched based on my familiarity with the students. There was one group though that was not benifitting its members. This one group was formed of two disadvantaged students which was obvious to all members of the class." we extend ourselves to the utmost to extract meaning from them, minimizing the fact that each of these sentences contains a certain disjunction between the reality of the situation and the words and phrases chosen to represent it, and that as a result the meaning of the piece hangs by its

very fingertips. Too often we have failed to press hard for the hard thinking and rethinking that the revision of such a piece would require and have permitted students to continue in a manner that contributes to an erroneous notion of the worth of their work and of their own powers of cognition.

But teachers with any experience know that students do not want this sort of dishonesty in our responses. Students do want to know what is right and wrong or good and bad, and those teachers who have in these last few years continued to work rigorously with their students' thinking, under the notion that opposition is true friendship, have heard time and again - as they brought their students to some fundamental understanding which should have been an integral part of their intellectual functioning for years, but which was entirely foreign to them - "Why didn't someone tell me this before?" Clearly the reason someone did not tell was because everyone forgot that the student was young and did not know, or worse, did not need to know.

There is no denying that we have a nurturing function as teachers, but there is also no denying that we have an instructional function that should take precedence. There are no gains, affective or otherwise, when our nurturing stance denies students the greatest potential source of a sense of their worth and dignity, namely their ability to control their language. There are no gains when our affective environments, for all their good intentions, create the situation where intellectual development lacks emphasis and where mute or mumbling our students stumble into the future. Student language productions need our best critical input, delivered not as though we were Gorgons, but with the attitude, "Everyman I will go with thee and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side." But that hand we place in theirs must not be flaccid, but firm.

Teacher vs. Student Responsibility

Non-interventionism has also led to our providing our students with increased

responsibility for their own learning, but while this too has been an important accomplishment, it is very much the case that when such responsibility is largely theirs, students do not necessarily move to the next level of complexity as soon as they have mastered their present one. Instead they will tend to stay at their present level of conceptualization either because they are comfortable with doing over and over what they do well, or else because they do not know that higher levels of conceptualization exist.

Students engaged in creating their own comic books, for instance, can easily remain at the level of identifying and depicting their characters, and never move to the level of constructing a plot to enmesh these characters or of writing dialogue to pass between them. Students studying Beowulf would not necessarily know how the decided loathing for the monster there could be seen as somewhat curious, even regrettable, unless they knew to try John Gardner's Grendel. Some might remember their mothers reading to them Kenneth Grahame's The Reluctant Dragon, where the monster tradition is overturned, but there is no assurance that they would move to the broader perspectives of Tolkein's "On Fairy Stories," where there are speculations about the pleasures which arise from reading about dragons, but not finding them in one's own backyard.

It is here that we ourselves have failed to accept responsibility for the learning that needs to take place. We have often not ensured, through the materials we gather, the instructional sequences we arrange, the questions we ask, indeed through our entire demeanor, that our students' engagement with their subject is like Sylvia Plath's camelia, opening flush upon flush, and that their levels of conceptualization, like the rungs of a ladder, serve not as a place to rest upon, but as the means to the next higher ones.

Some people will say that people do not learn in so orderly a manner, and that learning is in fact accompanied by false starts, backtrackings, dead ends,

tentative gropings, little side steps, and sometimes great intuitive leaps ahead. But it is not the function of education to replicate the entire spectrum of the inefficiencies of learning, but rather to reduce its inefficiencies by ordering and utilizing the broad processes by which knowledge is obtained.

Similarly, we have frequently abdicated our responsibility for the right functioning of the interactive environments that are such an integral part of today's English curriculum. We have succumbed too often to non-interventionist notions that student groups will manage to create for themselves, in one way or another, a viable mode of operating. Thus we have encouraged situations where student groups form themselves on the basis of relationships outside the classroom, or on racial, ethnic, or physical attributes, where good discussions seem to be a function of student serendipity, and where students come to believe that learning is always a social thing.

It is essential, however, that we intervene in the establishing of groups so that their formation is based on the principle that a group should be a microcosm of the larger context, with members of different orientations. Such an approach ensures a realistic environment, one that is extrapolative to the real world. It is easy enough for students to work with their own; the task is to be able to work with those who are not their own.

We need to take the responsibility for developing by direct instruction the cognitive and affective skills necessary for good discussions. Well in advance of such group work, it is necessary for us to put our students through preparatory exercises which will make them aware of the components of a discussion and which give them a heightened awareness where they realize what they are doing while they are doing it. Immediately prior to the discussion we need to explore with the groups the dimensions of the present discussion and what its perimeters will be, listing them for all to see. During the discussion we will have to act constantly

to keep before the discussants the sorts of awarenesses that have been previously developed.

We have to recognize too that while we have responsibility for setting group experiences into motion and for creating the crucible of interaction, we have an attendant responsibility for intervening and for moving our students out of the dependencies of the group situation and for creating opportunities for individual endeavor, for private reflection and solitary labor. When some new class enterprise is assigned, one of the most often heard student questions is, "Can we work with someone?" It may be necessary for us to respond more often, "No," or better, for us more often to ensure that group work revolves around experiences that are appropriate for group endeavor, that individual work consists of experiences that are appropriate for individual endeavor, and that we manage all of this in a way that will pattern students into knowing and assimilating the differences.

An Illustration

All of the above considerations come together in the following illustration. The Dartmouth orientation has encouraged informal writing and writing out on topics that are personal in nature. Peer correcting has been established as a standard mode of operating, and attention to mechanics has been informed by the notion that the flow of thought should take precedence and that having become interested in and committed to what they are writing, students will want to produce the best final versions they can.

This approach has brought us far more engaging writing than we have seen previously, though some of this may be due to the fact that a tenth grader reminiscing about his childhood is bound to be more engaging than one discoursing on the metaphysical aspects of Beaudelaire or Poe, but there is also the situation that this personal writing invariably turns out to be almost entirely narrative, with events strung out one after another, that the peer correcting may result in perhaps only one or two really useful comments being shared by partners in the course of their

whole interaction, and that spelling, punctuation, and other mechanical matters are no better in the final versions than they were in the first.

What appears to be the failure of this Dartmouth orientation, however, is not a function of the Dartmouth orientation itself, but rather is a function of our implementation of it, where under the influence of non-interventionism we have functioned as though what we want to occur will occur naturally or magically, when indeed, it will occur only with the greatest amount of teacher intervention.

Students drawing upon events in their lives will forever use narrative modes unless we intervene and help them to perceive events, for instance, in conceptual categories, to arrange these events not merely chronologically or in order of importance, but in terms of their relationship to other events, whether it be by association, or by cause and effect, and so on. This sort of response from the teacher will ensure that such writing, instead of being merely engaging, will represent the students functioning at the very edges of their knowledge and ability.

Peer correcting will yield few results unless, for instance, we intervene before the fact with the clear establishing of criteria, intervene during the fact to ensure that true dialogue is taking place, and intervene after the fact to determine whether this effort has had any effect. And no amount of casting students into writing, editing, and publishing roles will improve their mechanics unless they know where there is linguistic leeway open to them and where there is not, and so we must intervene with direct instruction, where the particular language skill is first discovered or examined in context, then is isolated in a didactic exercise that teaches the principle or rule that underlies it, and then it is practiced until mastery is achieved.

The last point is important, for repetition is the most basic of all learning strategies, and if the first two steps of discovery and isolation are achieved we can be assured that understanding is present, but mastery of use of the skill will

not come about without the third step of repetition. We should not let our adult impatience with practice be projected onto our students who, being young, have a considerable tolerance of and need for the repetition that will enable them to achieve mastery of whatever is before them.

This does not mean, of course, the reinstituting of endless grammar exercises with their identifying of correct or incorrect forms; it means the instituting of the actual manipulations of sentence combining and paragraph reconstruction, the tinkering with sentences and the crafting of them in workshop settings replete with comparisions with one another's productions, not the study of theoretical grammar, but the use of practical rhetoric, to form our student's language competency.

Though the interventionist stance urged here is based on the teacher's authority, it need not be authoritarian. Authoritarianism should be rooted out from wherever we find it, but authoritativeness can form the foundations of humane intervention, where the insight of those with greater age and experience is not denied but utilized. There is no point in being more experienced, Dewey once said, if instead of using our greater insight to organize the conditions of learning for the less experienced, we throw away our insight and do not respond to what we should know to be their real needs. We have always known this, but we are in a time when the worst of us, as Yeats would say, are full of passionate intensity, and the best lack all conviction. We need to regain that conviction, and once again establish our interventionist stance so that we will be able to keep the curriculum we have so dearly won after all these years and at the same time ensure that our students will leave this curriculum with their verbal abilities if not enhanced, then at least not impaired.